

George Meredith's *Rhoda Fleming*: Sexuality, Submission, and Subversion

Both in the review columns after its initial publication in 1865, and in more recent scholarship, Meredith's novel *Rhoda Fleming* has received comparatively scant attention. In completing the manuscript, Meredith himself admitted in correspondence to friends that 'I don't know at all what to think of the work', and that in rushing to complete the novel – a significantly more capacious piece of work than his initial plan for a single-volume 'plain story' – he conceded frustration at his 'D^d. D^d. D^d. uncertain workmanship'.¹ Despite such equivocation about the novel's merits, *Rhoda Fleming* addresses a number of thorny issues and articulates attitudes familiar to readers of his other fiction, such as a rejection of morbid sentimentalism, outrage at sexual double standards, criticism of unwholesomely restrictive codes of respectability, and a pervasive interest in gender politics. These recognisable themes of Meredith's writing notwithstanding, the novel still presents a critical challenge. On the one hand the apparent simplicity of the story – a moralistic tale of sexual seduction, remorse, and possible redemption – renders it surprisingly conventional for readers of Meredith's work as an example of fallen woman fiction which became popular in the mid-nineteenth century, alongside novels such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853) or George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859). On the other hand, the dense, digressive, and equivocal nature of *Rhoda Fleming* obscures attempts to resolve the text clearly into any linear format and thwarts easy resolution of its narrative complexities.

In part, this difficulty arises due to the text's masquerade as a novel concerned primarily with the heteronormative paradigms of seduction and marriage, both largely corollaries of heterosexual courtship. These concerns are represented primarily in Edward Blancove's

¹ George Meredith, *Letters*, 3 vols. ed. by C. L. Cline, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), '328. To Augustus Jessop', vol I, p. 302; '314. To William Hardman', vol. I, p. 290; '331. To Frederick A. Maxse', vol. I, p. 305.

seduction and subsequent abandonment of Dahlia Fleming, a relationship in which the privileged gentleman exploits the naiveté of a farmer's daughter. Similarly, they are evident in Robert Eccles' parallel courtship of Dahlia's sister Rhoda. The novel condemns the sexual betrayal of 'poor girls' like Dahlia, for whom the final lines of the text (in later, revised editions) explicitly urge protection, while offering the panacea of marital harmony as egalitarian ideal through the union of Rhoda and Robert.² These analogous yet oppositional relationships are treated cursorily and addressed only briefly in the text's conclusion. The final pages of the first edition, in fact, are not primarily concerned with the four central protagonists at all, and it is in a single terse sentence that Meredith returns to the two pairings which might be assumed to dominate the narrative, stating simply: 'there were joy-bells for Robert and Rhoda, but none for Dahlia and Edward'.³ While the later, revised edition clarifies Dahlia's decline and establishes her as a rallying point for the plight of sexually-exploited women, thereby establishing the political claims of the novel as a fallen woman narrative, the original version of the text is much less expansive and more equivocal.

In frustration at Meredith's refusal to remain focused on these elements of plot, critics have expressed irritation with *Rhoda Fleming* as a fundamentally flawed text in which its author became unnecessarily 'fascinated by minor characters and subordinate issues and allowed them to lead him on', such that Charles J. Hill suggested: 'one would like to prune a lot of it away'.⁴ The author is notably reluctant to foreground the pairing of these four central protagonists throughout the novel as one might expect. Similar accusations include the tendency to peripheralism in emphasising 'trivial incident and character', and the 'confusion

² Dahlia Fleming addresses Robert Eccles at her death in the final line of the 1886 revised edition of the text, requesting that he 'help poor girls'. This revised edition has now become the standard textual variant in most subsequent reprints of the novel (George Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming*, revised edition (London: Archibald Constable & Co., 1901), p. 416.

³ George Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, in three volumes (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1865), vol. III, p. 256. This first edition will be used throughout, unless stated otherwise, for example in cases where the revised edition introduces useful amendments to the original text.

⁴ Charles J. Hill, 'George Meredith's "Plain Story"', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 7.2 (1952), 90-102 (pp. 91-2).

and ignorance' that arise from the novel's reliance on mistaken identity and doubling.⁵ It is the contention of this article, however, that the peripheralities in the seemingly extraneous complexities of the narrative enable a reading of the novel as a subversive exploration of non-heteronormative sexuality. The queerness of the text emerges in the patterns of repetitive doubling and triangulation, which have become an established critical paradigm for considering non-normative expressions of desire. Meredith's novel not only explores but prioritises the erotic possibilities of submission, masochism, and libidinous intensity in same-sex relationships. *Rhoda Fleming* mobilises alternative experiences of heterosexual desire, often through inversions of power dynamics linked to gender. This is evident especially through the 'man-tamer' Mrs Margaret Lovell and masculine Rhoda, as well as Algernon Blancove's masochistic dispositions, and Robert Eccles, who is variously described as feeling, seeing, and talking 'like a woman'.⁶ Homoeroticism is similarly pervasive, evident not only in the desperate, jealous fierceness of Rhoda's feelings for her sister, but also in the male homosocial patterns of erotic competition and rivalry that pervade the text, in which male protagonists engage in reiterative forms of displaced heterosexual attachment to and through the three women of the novel.

The tendency to unconventional sexualities and gender fluidity in Meredith's work has not gone unnoticed. Most notably, Melissa Shields Jenkins's essay on 'Alternative Sexualities in the Novels of George Meredith' offers a crucial revision of his fiction from a queer theoretical perspective. Through an analysis of texts such as *The Egoist* (1879), *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), and *The Amazing Marriage* (1895), Jenkins convincingly traces some of the ways in which his novels 'undermine sex and gender conventions within depictions of

⁵ David Howard, 'Rhoda Fleming: Meredith in the Margins', in *Meredith Now: Some Critical Essays*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1971), pp. 130-143 (p. 132). Critics have also viewed the novel as a failed attempt at popularity (Ioan Williams), and as a novel which draws on un-Meredithian conventions of sensation and melodrama (Mohammed Shaheen and Richard C. Stevenson).

⁶ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 46; vol. I, p. 283.

heterosexual unions’.⁷ I have also written elsewhere about Meredith’s interest in conflicted gender identification and erotic desire, which renders male adolescence a type of queer identity in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859).⁸ This article adopts a similar theoretical framework to show that *Rhoda Fleming*, despite its apparent conventionalities, allows for a particularly expansive, non-binary view of gender and sexuality, in which both are denaturalised, and in which normative behaviour is not privileged – at least, not until the end of the text, when heterosexual marriage cautiously reasserts itself as means of circumscribing the more equivocal modes of expression and identification in the body of the narrative. Instead, the ambiguity with which Meredith envisions sexual orientation and gender identity counters the rigidities of respectability that his fiction is so often at pains to challenge. This is evident in the flexible, open, and destabilising modes of sexual experience and affinity that a number of his protagonists are seen to negotiate in *Rhoda Fleming*.

Meredith’s text interrogates the homogenising imperative of heteronormativity. This is achieved through homoerotically-fraught moments of sympathy, intimacy, and violence between men, but also in the vehemence of the sororal bond Rhoda feels for her sister Dahlia. The two sisters are counterparts of one another: one dark, one fair; one masculine, one feminine. However, they are intimately bound together throughout the narrative. The intensity of their closeness acquires an erotic valence, gesturing towards the unlicensed affinities of both lesbianism and incest, while the shared bond of sisterhood possesses the ameliorative capacity to redeem sexual sin and rehabilitate the sinner, a trope popular in Victorian literature, as Michael Cohen and Helena Michie have noted.⁹ *Rhoda Fleming* is a text in which sisterhood

⁷ Melissa Shields Jenkins, “‘Was ever hero in this fashion won?’ Alternative Sexualities in the Novels of George Meredith”, in *Straight Writ Queer: Non-Normative Expressions of Heterosexuality in Literature*, ed. by Richard Fantina (Jefferson, NC: Mcfarland, 2006), pp. 124-133 (p. 124).

⁸ Alice Crossley, *Male Adolescence in Mid-Victorian Fiction: George Meredith, W. M. Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), chapter 6.

⁹ Michael Cohen, *Sisters: Relation and Rescue in Nineteenth-Century British Novels and Paintings* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995); Helena Michie, “‘There is no friend like a sister’: Sisterhood as Sexual Difference”, *ELH*, 56.2 (1989), 401-21.

is also imagined in terms of hostility and sexual rivalry. Although this division, as Cohen notes, ‘occurs in a context where equality is clearly the ideal relation among sisters’, Rhoda’s painful attachment to Dahlia prevents her in many ways from proper equitable, sympathetic communal feeling with her sibling, as when she tries to save Dahlia by forcing her into a disastrous marriage with the villainous Nicodemus Sedgett.¹⁰ The strength of Rhoda’s bond with Dahlia is evoked by the scene in which Rhoda visits her sister at their uncle Anthony’s London home:

[Rhoda] undressed, and half dozing over her beating heart in bed, heard the street door open, and leaped to think that her sister approached, jumping up in her bed to give ear to the door and the stairs, that were conducting her joy to her: but she quickly recomposed herself, and feigned sleep, for the delight of revelling in her sister’s first wonderment. [...] there was a delicious silence, and she felt that Dahlia was coming up to her on tiptoe, and waited for her head to be stooped near, that she might fling out her arms, and draw the dear head to her bosom. .¹¹

Rhoda waits in a state of excitement for Dahlia to return to the house, gleefully expecting to witness her own naked pleasure at their surprise recoupling mirrored in the girl she loves so absorbedly, but finds instead that Dahlia’s response is muted and strange. As Dahlia moves to the bed and watches Rhoda without waking her, Dahlia speaks to herself not about her own wonderment and joy at finding her sister arrived from the country, but instead about her anguish and distress. Rhoda freezes, feigning sleep until Dahlia joins her in bed, feeling trapped and unsure of herself following her sister’s worrying reaction: ‘The vibration of Dahlia’s voice went through Rhoda like the heavy shaking of the bell after it had struck, and the room seemed to spin and hum. It was to her but another minute before her sister slid softly into the bed, and

¹⁰ Cohen, *Sisters*, p. 146.

¹¹ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 80; p. 82.

they were locked together'.¹² This new distance between them is explained shortly afterwards, when Rhoda discovers that her sister has fallen in love with Edward Blancove.

Rhoda registers physically Dahlia's shift in her affections, in her sensory response to her sister. The revelation of Dahlia's love for a man inspires a sense of awe in Rhoda, who is caught between fascination at Dahlia's romantic experience, which she realises she cannot share, and an alarm at the change Dahlia's new relationship might bring about to their own closeness. On returning home from London to Queen Anne's Farm, Rhoda felt 'heavier for a secret that she bore with her'.¹³ Her reflections reveal a sense of frigid emptiness in considering Dahlia's new position: 'she had no feeling for herself. Her passion was fixed upon her sister'.¹⁴ Rhoda is disturbed by the news, and yet lives through the emotional connection with her sister, despite Dahlia's withdrawal. The longing intimacy with Dahlia that Rhoda craves throughout much of the narrative is openly acknowledged, both by their father, who observes resentfully that 'It's sister and sister, with you', and by Rhoda herself in her ardent declaration that she feels separation from Dahlia feels akin to 'a division that was like the division of her living veins'.¹⁵ Rhoda feels protective towards Dahlia, but the extremity of her wish to exclude others from their dynamic also indicates a less clearly articulated covetousness in the tenor of her feelings. The narrative reveals that Rhoda 'suffered great longings to be with her sister', and her hunger for Dahlia is couched in terms romantic, sensuous, and with a force that others – such as Mr Fleming, Anthony Hackbut, Edward, and Robert – clearly find challenging to comprehend.¹⁶ It is outside their realm of experience. Algernon Blancove's description of her as a girl who would not bend her principles, 'not even for a sister or a lover', draws implicit

¹² Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 82.

¹³ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 108.

¹⁴ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 110.

¹⁵ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 123; p. 31.

¹⁶ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 146.

parity between the two relations.¹⁷ ‘Sister’ and ‘lover’ become all but interchangeable. This indeterminacy informs the homoeroticism of their sisterhood.

Rhoda’s affective bond with Dahlia mirrors the intensity of romantic heterosexual relationships in the novel. In fact, one of Rhoda’s most passionate declarations of desperate love for her sister takes place in parallel with Robert Eccles’s first avowal of his desire for Rhoda herself, inviting the two dynamics to be considered alongside one another. As Robert declares his love, expressed with a fierceness which echoes Rhoda’s love for her sibling, the young woman is resistant to his attentions, citing Dahlia as the root of her inability to reciprocate his attraction:

My sister?—what has my sister to do with me?—you mean!—you mean—you can only mean that we are to be separated and thought of as two people; and we are one, and will be till we die. I feel my sister’s hand in mine, though she’s away and lost. She is my darling for ever and ever. We’re one!¹⁸

For Rhoda, the sororal bond is absolutely exclusive, depicting a feeling of such intensity that all else – other types of love – are effectively abjured. Her sister is all to her, and part of her very fabric; the language she uses is passionate, fanatical, and close in tone to that of a lover. This same rhetoric is employed by Robert, whose declaration also reveals a violent aspect:

‘By Heaven! the task of taming you—that’s the blessing I’d beg for in my prayers! Though you were as wild as a cat of the woods, by Heaven! I’d rather have the taming of you than go about with a leash of quiet’, he checked himself—— ‘companions’. [...] ‘You’re the beauty to my taste, and Devil is what I want in a woman! I can make something out of a girl with a temper like yours’. [...] ‘I tell you I’ll have you whether you will or no’.¹⁹

¹⁷ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 140.

¹⁸ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 234.

¹⁹ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, pp. 235-6.

Robert's first declaration is made when it becomes clear to the Fleming family that Dahlia's honour and respectability have been compromised. The timing is suggestive, as it helps to establish a link between his feelings for Rhoda on the one hand, and hers for her sister on the other, indicating a kind of slippage in their relations to one another. Cohen has similarly noted that these two relationships are intertwined, positing that Robert possibly functions as another kind of 'sister' by the end of the narrative.²⁰ These parities are complicated, however, as Farmer Fleming had also presumed *Dahlia* to have been Robert's preference of the two girls, and it is Rhoda's passionate defense of her sister that incites Robert to forcibly declare his love. This is compounded by Rhoda's equivocal statement that if Robert is able to find Dahlia and extricate her from 'trouble', she will reconsider his proposal. 'Get her here to me', Rhoda seems to promise, 'and I'll do what I can [...] But I haven't a feeling of any kind while my sister's away'.²¹ Her acceptance of Robert's address and restoration to 'feeling' rest on the return of Dahlia, her sister.

Robert's subsequent attempt to force himself on Rhoda in frustration also contains echoes of Dahlia's predicament, critiquing a society in which men have sexual license – men who, like Edward and Sedgett, are seen to prioritise their own desires at the expense of women. Sisterhood, romantic attachment, and confused identification over the object of desire are therefore woven together here. Like other protagonists in the novel, who must learn by the narrative's end to conform, at least partially, to a heterosexual cultural imperative, Rhoda eventually defuses her possessive attitude towards Dahlia, recognising the harm she has done her sister and so finding greater equilibrium in her manner towards her sister. In doing so she is finally able to open her heart to Robert – or, at least, they are united in marriage at the novel's end.

²⁰ Cohen, *Sisters*, p.152.

²¹ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, pp. 239-40.

The homoerotic sibling relationship between Dahlia and Rhoda finds suggestive parallels in the friendships and rivalries established between the young male characters of the novel: Edward and Algernon Blancove, Robert Eccles, Percy Waring, and Nicodemus Sedgett. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has established, erotic triangles in literature are revelatory of male homosocial desire, which often involves a 'routing of homosocial desire through women'.²² Such asymmetry within the novel's sexual continuum, which places male protagonists in imitative, reciprocal, or competitive relations with one another that are mediated through women, is therefore indicative of the novel's queer dynamics. The avowed interest in the female characters, for Meredith's male protagonists, serves to illustrate both individual and collective male socially-sanctioned operationality within patriarchal culture, in which an enactment of heterosexual desire emerges as a means to establish social cachet and legitimise masculine credentials. This performance is often enabled by male-male relations, and underpinned by the novel's subversion of normative expressions of heterosexual desire, which is articulated in two ways. Firstly, heterosexual desire is challenged by the erotic symmetries of the text, which may be read according to Sedgwick's theory of male homosocial desire. Secondly, depictions of subversive, non-normative elements of sexuality are traced in the queer heterosexual impulses exhibited by male characters who choose to adopt a sexually passive style of erotic attachment (notably through the submissive, masochistic tendencies of Edward and Algernon Blancove). Conventional gendered codes of heteronormative behaviour are therefore disrupted.

The transference of sexual interest across characters in this novel is particularly pronounced by means of the doubling, substitutions, and mistaken identities that critics have found so frustrating. Two of the central female characters (Rhoda and Peggy Lovell) are

²² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 49.

repeatedly figured as objects of desire, yet also function as mediators for fascination exhibited between male characters. Peggy Lovell is described as alluring and seductive for most of the young men at some point in the text – by her adoring ‘lap-dog’ Algernon, his cousin Edward, Robert who is ‘intoxicated’ by her, and Robert’s friend Percy Waring.²³ At various moments in the text, their admiration for her becomes means of mutual feeling and recognition, particularly between Percy and Robert, and Edward and Algernon. Rhoda also becomes an object of desire for both Algernon and Robert. For Algernon, at least, fighting for Rhoda’s attention in contest with the other man adds piquancy to the situation. The reader is told that ‘if Robert perchance should be courting Rhoda, [Algernon] and Robert would enter into another field of controversy’, which prospect is considered by the gentleman with apparent relish if ‘Robert might be taught a lesson’.²⁴ Robert’s passion, conversely, is aroused almost to brutality when he thinks that Rhoda will marry Algernon. Such interwoven dynamics establish competition and mimicry as crucial to the structure of male homosocial relationships, and the intersection in turn of those relationships with heterosexual courtship.

In their jostling to achieve status and to perform according to the heteronormative expectations of their cultural milieu, the men in the novel depend on their homosocial relationships for their sense of security and success. Male peer-validation is therefore crucial, and mimicry in desire often underpins the articulation of erotic interest in *Rhoda Fleming*. This is evident in the attraction to Mrs Lovell expressed by Algernon, Edward, Robert, and Percy, as well as Robert’s and Algernon’s paralleled desire for Rhoda. The imitative, reciprocal aspect of their erotic impulses relies in part on the fact that, as rivals, these men legitimise and enable each other’s desire. Such validation becomes crucial as, while the majority of these young men possess some measure of independence, they still have no settled adult identity conferred

²³ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 135; vol. II, p. 233.

²⁴ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. III, p. 42.

through husbandhood, fatherhood, or the status of professional success. The ‘elastic’ young Algernon Blancove occupies a gestural position at his uncle’s bank, obtained for him by his father as means of instilling discipline after the young man had been forcefully ‘encouraged’ to quit the military.²⁵ Robert Eccles similarly left the army and has become an apprentice farmer, while Edward Blancove is studying for the law. As bachelors, these men occupy tenuous social positions, still in training before society elects them to an adulthood that ratifies their embodiment of particular patriarchal values. Each is therefore a figure on a threshold, and as bachelors they gesture towards domestication on the one hand, and transgression on the other.²⁶ Vincent Bartolini has argued that ‘Bachelorhood ... functioned as a useful rhetoric of single manhood through which homosexual content could safely, if codedly, gain literary expression’.²⁷ Such homoerotic bonds are certainly evident between men in Meredith’s novel.

Resistance to heteronormative identity and behaviour emerges by means of several queer male homosocial dynamics, drawing on a series of threads which entwine several bachelors across the narrative to illustrate male-male intimacy, fascination, or tension. This is manifest, for example, in the tenderness of Robert and Percy’s friendship, about which Peggy Lovell admits ‘I never, I confess, exactly understood the intimacy existing between you’.²⁸ The surprising friendship is viewed as subversive in part due to their class difference, but the sense of parity and mutual reliance and respect exhibited by both men is also inflected with an erotic aspect. Although they are often aligned (both cherishing a tenderness for Mrs Lovell, for example), their negotiations of manliness differ. Robert is often feminised by his military friend’s quietly assertive demeanour and contrastingly maternal attentions. On making an appearance at church after his illness, Robert finds himself ‘abashed’ and confused by the

²⁵ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 84.

²⁶ Vincent C. Bartolini, ‘Fireside Chastity: The Erotics of Sentimental Bachelorhood in the 1850s’, *American Literature*, 68.4 (1996), 707-737, (p. 709).

²⁷ Bartolini, p. 731.

²⁸ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. III, p. 251.

picture of disorganised working-class masculinity he presents to the congregation next to his suave, aristocratic friend, experiencing ‘the trembling sensitiveness of a woman who weighs the merits of a lover’, as he contemplates ‘walking down the aisle’ by Percy’s side.²⁹ Robert’s tendency to defer to his friend’s authority establishes a pattern within their relationship that borrows from gendered codes of behaviour and performance, as well as class distinction. Percy tells him that ‘You see like a woman perhaps, Robert. You certainly talk like a woman’, and he gives his friend strength, direction, and clearer purpose when dealing with the Blancoves.³⁰ Holly Furneaux has offered a compelling argument for male homosocial desire being demonstrated via the act of male nursing.³¹ In *Rhoda Fleming*, Percy, ‘the sweetest and gentlest of men’ yet also a ‘slayer’, fondly helps to nurse his friend back to health after he has been attacked by Nic Sedgett.³² Percy is allowed into the privileged space of the Pilot Inn’s private rooms to witness Robert’s recovery, and is able to provide a sounding board for Robert’s anxieties and private reflections, demonstrating their intimacy and mutual affection.

While appreciative of his friend’s openness and sensitivity, Percy Waring himself remains largely impenetrable to Robert’s scrutiny, despite his willingness to draw out Robert on the subject of his romantic interest in Rhoda, chastising his friend for not having mentioned her in his letters. While Robert is aware of ‘a woman in Percy’s antecedent history’, the details are shrouded in secrecy, and in this way – on the topic of sexual attraction – the friendship operates unevenly.³³ Robert, for example, openly reveals himself unable to exert self-control when it comes to Mrs Lovell – who, unbeknownst to Robert, had long been the object of Percy’s undisclosed affections. The unconscious mimicry of Robert’s fascination for Mrs

²⁹ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, pp. 121-2.

³⁰ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 109;

³¹ See Holly Furneaux, “‘It is impossible to be gentler’: The Homoerotics of Male Nursing in Dickens’s Fiction”, *Critical Survey*, 17.2 (2005), 34-47, and ‘Negotiating the Gentle-Man: Male Nursing and Class Conflict in the ‘High’ Victorian Period’, in *Conflict and Difference in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, ed. by Dinah Birch and Mark Llewellyn (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), pp. 109-125.

³² Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 94.

³³ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 98.

Lovell also establishes their relationship as a form of erotic displacement, in which Robert's inability to resist Mrs Lovell's allure is like a shadow of Percy's own fixation:

I do, I declare, clean *forget* Rhoda; I forget the girl, if only I see Mrs. Lovell at a distance. How's that? I'm not a fool, with nonsensical fancies of any kind. I know what loving a woman is; and a man in my position might be ass enough to—all sorts of things. It isn't that; it's fascination. I'm afraid of her. If she talks to me, I feel something like having gulped a bottle of wine. Some women you have a respect for; some you like or you love; some you despise: with her, I just feel I'm intoxicated.³⁴

Percy re-engages with his lost love via Robert, observing and identifying with his friend's confusion at Mrs Lovell's power over men. Robert's articulation of desire for Mrs Lovell stands in for Percy's silence until the closing chapter of the narrative, which witnesses Percy's renewed suit of Mrs Lovell, and disappointment at losing the 'enchantress' and 'animated enigma'.³⁵ This example illustrates the way that triangulated, displaced desire pervades the narrative, and informs the homosocial bonds of *Rhoda Fleming*.

If gentle touch and nurturing support imply a level of homoerotic intimacy between Robert and Percy, such a dynamic is thrown into contrast by the aggressive but no less erotically suggestive behaviour of other young men in the novel. An example of this is the elaborate sparring match between Edward and Algernon in the former's rooms, a manifestation of competitive engagement which foreshadows the doubling between the pair throughout the novel, one often being mistaken for the other, and in their mutual interest in Peggy Lovell. This combative element of male-male relations is also apparent in the repeated association of Nic Sedgett with a particularly savage, bestial form of masculinity, as he attacks and bullies both Robert and Algernon. The homoerotic potential of both the tactile, gentle, companionate

³⁴ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 233.

³⁵ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. III, p. 252; vol. III, p. 255.

friendship of Percy and Robert, and those other occasions of pugilistic engagement, resonate as exhibitions of the fluidity of masculinity and untrammelled male sexuality in *Rhoda Fleming* before heteronormative marriage finally resolves such ambiguities. This exploration of explosive and antagonistic erotic energy in male-male relations is highlighted when, after his disastrous visit to Epsom races, Algernon rides with Sedgett back to London and they brawl publicly in the road. The ‘antagonistic couple’ are pulled up by a man in a donkey-cart, who narrates the ‘pummelling match’ for the gathered onlookers:

Sort of a ‘man-and-wife’ quarrel [...] There’s something as corks ’em up, and something uncorks ’em; but what that something is, I ain’t, nor you ain’t, man enough to inform the company.³⁶

For its implication regarding gendered behaviour, the phrase “‘man-and-wife’ quarrel’ is particularly suggestive, especially in its application to two men in an impromptu public sparring match. The phraseology implies both a failure to perform manliness sufficiently, yet also (simultaneously) an excess of an aggressive form of masculinity, both of which are pent up or ‘cork[ed]’ and then unleashed in violence. One of the two men, however, is clearly feminised by the term, reinforced by Sedgett when he states that Algernon has ‘bonneted’ himself.³⁷ The episode might also involve an implied sexual dynamic, in the insinuations that Sedgett will effectively coerce or blackmail Algernon into handing over money, and in the bracketing of the unlikely pair as ‘man-and-wife’. The transgressive implications of the encounter are also referenced through the driver’s claim that none of the onlookers are ‘man enough’ to fully comprehend what lies at the heart of the altercation. The competitive nature of the relationship between Algernon and Sedgett helps to illustrate how desire operates in the

³⁶ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 226; vol. II, p. 227.

³⁷ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 224.

novel through unconventional pairings, doublings, and triadic dynamics involving erotic substitutions and parallels.

As well as the recurrence of homoerotic relationships, which subvert the novel's surface insistence on narratives of heterosexual courtship and seduction, Meredith's text is also concerned with the inclusion of intense experiences within heterosexuality that are nonetheless considered a perversion of dominant sexual norms, or which are obtained through expressing gender in non-traditional ways. This is manifest in his depiction of male sexual passivity (especially through Algernon) and sexually dominant women (such as Mrs Lovell), and his deployment of language redolent of masochistic desire to articulate such – heterosexual, but still culturally *non-normative* – sexual behaviours. In helping to formulate the critical idea of queer heterosexuality, Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson reflect that 'queer theorists have expanded the notion of "queer" to include, among other things, a particular way of doing heterosex', thus offering a useful theoretical framework brought to bear in this study.³⁸ As Denise Hunter Gravatt has contended, recovering and reading queerness may therefore include 'considering the normativizing constraints regulating sexual and social power relations between the sexes' as well as same-sex erotic dynamics.³⁹ Both the homoerotic and the queerly heterosexual are relevant in evaluating alternative sexualities in *Rhoda Fleming*.

The novel involves a deferral of normative heterosexual culture as it is embodied in marriage as an institution, relegating marriage to the text's conclusion. In doing so, however, the text does not necessarily posit marriage as the conventional corrective to realign sexual desire along a normative axis, as is often the case with mid-Victorian fiction. Marriage emerges as a familiar economic tool, as Mrs Lovell chooses to marry for money. But even during her

³⁸ Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson, 'Virgins and Queers: Rehabilitating Heterosexuality?', *Gender and Society*, 8.3 (1994), 444-462 (p. 451).

³⁹ Denise Hunter Gravatt, "'A rod of flexible steel in that little hand': Female Dominance and Male Masochism in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*", in *Straight Writ Queer*, ed. by Richard Fantina (Jefferson, NC: Mcfarland, 2006), pp. 109-123 (p. 110).

revelation of this fact to the disappointed Percy Waring, the widow retains her playful lack of fixity in sexual object choice, letting Percy mistake her intended future husband firstly for himself, then Algernon, then Edward, and then Edward's father Sir William in turn.⁴⁰ Percy is appalled at Mrs Lovell's assertion that 'I have engaged that I would take the name of Blancove'.⁴¹ Aghast, Percy enquires, 'You mean to marry Algernon Blancove?', and then 'Can you mean that Edward Blancove is the man?', before she admits 'I marry a banker's account' in her acceptance of Sir William Blancove.⁴² This instability is of a piece with the text's attitude towards sexual interest and its kaleidoscopic erotic potential. The first edition ends abruptly with this scene between Percy and Mrs Lovell. It is only in the revised edition that this episode is succeeded by a portrait of Mrs Lovell as 'an old gentleman's demure young wife' and 'a sweet hostess'.⁴³ As a married woman her state is envisioned as a trade-off for her sexually-inviting, erotically-fascinating past life, thereby curbing her power to incite men to sacrifice themselves for her – literally, in duels – earlier in the narrative: 'by this marriage the lady paid for such wild oats as she had sown in youth'.⁴⁴ The 'man-tamer' does, at least in the revised edition, become tamed, which shifts the novel into more conventional narrative traditions.⁴⁵ However, the revised edition also includes a brief paragraph explaining away Rhoda's marriage to Robert beyond the terse final line of the first edition, which claims 'there were joy-bells for Robert and Rhoda'.⁴⁶ The expanded detail of their marriage stands as a seemingly conventionally-happy arrangement blessed with a 'growing swarm' of children, perhaps as a

⁴⁰ The queerness of Mrs Lovell's withholding, which gives rise to Percy's painfully cyclical guesswork, is rendered even more unstable by an error in the first edition, in which the misleading line 'I marry his [Algernon's] father' (who has, in fact, recently died), is replaced by the – accurate revision – 'I marry the banker' (i.e. Edward's father). (Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, in 3 volumes, vol. III, p. 256; Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming*, revised edition, p. 415).

⁴¹ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. III, p. 254.

⁴² Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. III, p. 254; vol. III, p. 255.

⁴³ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming*, revised edition, p. 415.

⁴⁴ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming*, revised edition, p. 415.

⁴⁵ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 46.

⁴⁶ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. III, p. 256.

corrective to Rhoda's perceived masculinity and Robert's own feminine qualities.⁴⁷ The final vision of marriage in that later edition, however, includes Dahlia as a third party who, as her married sister's 'housemate', nonetheless felt 'deeper community with Robert on one subject than she let Rhoda share'.⁴⁸ This subverts convention, suggesting that marriage is not necessarily an exclusive duality, but that instead a triadic dynamic may still operate within its presumed heteronormative confines. Even in the second edition, then, with its more conventional, expansive ending, marriage does not arrest the narrative to provide resolution. Through its resistance to cultural and sexual convention, ambiguities remain in the novel's conclusion, in which the normativising patterns of heterosexual marriage are still flexible and porous.

Rhoda, Robert, and Algernon are of especial interest throughout the novel for their queer performances of heterosexuality. Rhoda is viewed by Robert in particular as unwomanly, challenging the stereotype which relegates her to a supporting role in their envisioned dynamic. Robert's desire for her is often, in fact, inspired as much by her supposed masculinity as it is by her muted femininity. Robert rhapsodises about her thick, black eyebrows, her fierce courage, and her hatred of him, which inflame his attraction. Rhoda is imagined as 'harshly earthly', 'repulsive in her coldness', and is unusually 'frank', all of which set her apart from Robert's romantic idea of womanhood in which Rhoda is abstracted as his key to 'peace, and babies, and farming'.⁴⁹ Her determination and perseverance are contrasted with Robert himself, who regrets that he is 'like a woman' who cannot help but 'gabble' about Rhoda; in contrast she is steadfast and resolute: 'less like a woman, Robert thought, than a creature born for battle'.⁵⁰ Rhoda is marked by her bravery, staunchness, daunting level of self-possession, and

⁴⁷ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming*, revised edition, p. 415.

⁴⁸ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming*, revised edition, p. 415; p. 416.

⁴⁹ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 36; p. 97; p. 103; p. 275.

⁵⁰ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 103; p. 105.; vol. III, p. 120.

qualities that are reminiscent of the military (a field in which both Robert and Algernon found themselves notably lacking).

If Rhoda is perceived as masculine and unwomanly, Mrs Lovell emerges as a dangerous type of femininity: seductive, alluring, and manipulative. Her ability to dominate men presents a particular challenge to masculinity in the novel and disrupts prevalent assumptions about manliness. As indicated above, several male characters fall under her spell, and find themselves driven to desperate displays to attract her attention (even unto death by duelling) or are otherwise unmanned in their attempts to win her approbation. It is through their interactions with Mrs Lovell, the ‘man-tamer’, and their relative subjugation and submission to her, that the masculinity of numerous male protagonists is interrogated and subverted.⁵¹ Mrs Lovell seems to collect men, who flock around her:

Mrs. Lovell was beautiful. Under the light of the two duels her beauty shone as from an illumination of black flame. Boys adored Mrs. Lovell. These are moths. But more, the birds of air, nay, grave owls (who stand in this metaphor for whiskered experience) thronged, dashing at the apparition of terrible splendour.⁵²

She is surrounded by satellites, ‘boys’ as well as men, on whom her ‘terrible splendour’ exerts a magnetic pull. While Michael Cohen views Mrs Lovell as a subversive ‘anti-sister’ to the two Fleming girls, particularly in her indeterminate class position, she may be seen to function in the text as a ‘democratic virus’ in another sense, too, as her appeal makes no distinction between male victims based on class.⁵³ She finds the gentlemanly Edward Blancove and Lord Suckling as receptive to her thirst for adoration as the working-class Robert, who becomes ‘manageable in silken trammels’ under her false assurances of immediate help in finding Dahlia.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 46.

⁵² Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, pp. 90-1.

⁵³ Cohen, *Sisters*, p. 50; Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 86.

⁵⁴ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 46.

Although she may enjoy subduing men, especially those she considers brave, valorous adversaries, many of them collude in and relish their own submission. This reveals a dynamic that is problematic for conventional assumptions about masculinity, which relied on the possession of qualities such as discipline, self-control, assertiveness, and strength of mind and body. Edward finds himself trapped awkwardly between his wish to subject himself to Mrs Lovell and gain her admiration, and a desire, conversely, to dominate her. He finds her management of other young men fascinating, but his own masculinity is affronted when he imagines that she does not consider him physically brave, becoming jealous of her attentions:

Edward saw, and was astonished himself to feel that she had ceased to breathe that fatal inciting breath, which made men vindictively emulous of her favour, and mad to match themselves for a claim to the chief smile. No perceptible change was displayed. She was Mrs. Lovell still; vivacious and soft; flame-coloured, with the arrowy eyelashes; a pleasant companion, who did not play the woman obtrusively among men, and show a thirst for homage. All the difference appeared to be, that there was an absence as of some evil spiritual emanation.

And here a thought crossed him—one of the memorable little evanescent thoughts which sway us by our chance weakness; ‘Does she think me wanting in physical courage?’ [...]

It was distracting; sober-thoughted as he was by nature. He watched the fair simplicity of her new manner with a jealous eye. Her management of the two youths was exquisite; but to him, Edward, she had never condescended to show herself thus mediating and amiable. Why? [...] Did the fair seraph think him anything less than a man? [...] How gracious she was and like a Goddess with these boys, as he called them!⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, pp. 63-4, pp. 64-5.

His desire for Mrs Lovell to be ‘amiable’ drives him to flirt with her, inviting her influence over him once more, harking back to their previous relationship at which the novel hints. At the same time, however, he wishes to exert his own power over her, to assert his own will forcefully: ‘Her cold wit, Satanic as the gleam of it struck through his mind, gave him a throb of desire to gain possession of her, and crush her’.⁵⁶ Edward is covetous, competing for her favour with mere ‘boys’, and anxious to prove his masculinity. But he is unable to find a balance in the mode and pursuit of his sexual interest. The novel tells us that ‘he set to work to subdue Mrs. Lovell. [But] His own subjugation was the first fruit of his effort’.⁵⁷ His quandary and precarious negotiation of dominance and submission, caught between ‘subjugation’ and the desire to ‘crush’, ‘subdue’ and ‘possess’, persists throughout the narrative, leading to an equivocal view of manliness.

Algernon Blancove’s response to Mrs Lovell extends the eroticised power dynamic of male submission to female authority. While Edward and Robert both struggle to retain some ascendancy and find their sense of personal diminishment in Mrs Lovell’s eyes troubling, Algernon in contrast embraces the embodiment of male sexual passivity. Janice Carlisle has suggested that the Blancove cousins exhibit melancholic tendencies, indicating that ‘these men suffer from a condition that requires that they exchange their positions of relative superiority with those whom they would conventionally dominate’.⁵⁸ Algernon in particular occupies a position in the text that is not particularly powerful. He is abortive in his actions, and often apathetic in his behaviour, struggling weakly and ineffectively to extricate himself from debt, from Sedgett’s obnoxious pursuit, and from the perceived mundanity of his life. Mrs Lovell, however, inspires in him a kind of fervent devotion. His subscription to her authority – his shift

⁵⁶ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 69.

⁵⁷ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 77.

⁵⁸ Janice Carlisle, *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 54.

away from ‘relative superiority’ in exchange for capitulation – not only reveals acceptance but also exhibits his pleasure in the exposure and vulnerability that such submission involves. Algernon basks in her flirtatious command of him: Mrs Lovell ‘played [with him as] prettily as a mistress teasing her lap-dog to jump for a morsel’; she is ‘teacher’ to her ‘pupil’, and Algernon is a ‘devout’ ‘cavalier’, whose relationship with her is couched in terms of chivalry.⁵⁹ The language used to describe Mrs Lovell’s power over men aligns with Slavoj Žižek’s assessment of the libidinal economy of courtly love, in which masochism emerges as fundamental to the dynamic.⁶⁰ Edward establishes this early in the novel when he admits that ‘I’ve what they call “knelt at her feet”’, and ‘been a little dog to her myself, and fetched and carried, and wagged my tail’, implying that Algernon now occupies this inferior position in his stead.⁶¹ Edward, however, pities what he views as his cousin’s ‘weakness’ over Mrs Lovell, pathologising such behaviour by observing that ‘to be her master [...] one must not begin by writhing as her slave,’ while Algernon openly pursues his voluntary subjugation and humiliation in the spirit of courtly love.⁶² He adopts the language of chivalric worship and romantic surrender, invoking ‘Mistress Lovell! Madame! my Princess Lovell’, deferring to her judgement when obstacles arrive that leave him helpless ‘just like a baby’, and presenting her with an opal as an (inadvertently) symbolic gift.⁶³ In doing so, Algernon participates in aestheticised performances of surrender which establish and legitimise his submission to a dominant woman, thereby subverting traditional gender roles. ‘Male masochism’, Gravatt contends, ‘disavows a masculinity predicated on phallic mastery, and hence becomes a strategic site for queer heterosexual resistance to heteronormativity’.⁶⁴ Algernon’s submission

⁵⁹ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, pp. 135-6; p. 131.

⁶⁰ Slavoj Žižek, ‘Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing’, in *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality*, (London and New York: Verso, 2005), pp. 89-112.

⁶¹ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 100; p. 102.

⁶² Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 260; vol. II, p. 80.

⁶³ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. II, p. 90; p. 56.

⁶⁴ Gravatt, p. 112.

to Mrs Lovell opens the text to revisions of fixed codes for gender identity, inverted power dynamics, and alternative forms of sexual identification.

Masochism, as the theoretical work of Gilles Deleuze, Kaja Silverman, and Suzanne Stewart has shown, presupposes abdication of self and will, but is in fact often predicated on implicit agency and self-control.⁶⁵ Algernon's cultivated attitude of submission and illusion of powerlessness is clearly performative; his position as a male member of the gentry within patriarchal society still indicates an automatically legitimised and authoritative status. However, his longing for an alternative path that depends on various fantasies of rejecting that patriarchal and class-based authority also plays a part in his adoption of a passive, impuissant masculinity. Algernon not only engages in the stylised rituals of aristocratic courtly love with Mrs Lovell, and places himself constantly in situations where he is likely to fail and be humiliated (like his loss of fortune at Epsom races); he also has a fantasy about making a new, active vigorous life for himself in the colonies:

Civilization had tried him, and found him wanting; so he condemned it. Moreover, sitting now all day at a desk, he was civilization's drudge. No wonder, then, that his dream was of prairies, and primeval forests, and Australian wilds. He believed in his heart that he would be a man new made over there, and always looked forward to savage life as to a bath that would cleanse him, so that it did not much matter his being unclean for the present.⁶⁶

The appeal of the 'Australian wilds' rests on its difference from his current life, in which he has been found incompetent and degenerate. Jean Sudrann has drawn attention to the importance of 'visions', suggesting that several characters in *Rhoda Fleming* 'have some "other life," and that life stirs them to responses which have as significant effects as any of their

⁶⁵ See Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), and Suzanne R. Stewart, *Sublime Surrender: Male Masochism at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁶⁶ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 87.

external fortunes'.⁶⁷ The fantasy of Algernon's 'other life' on the opposite side of the world is frequently reiterated. The perceived failure of his current life will then, in his mind, be 'cleanse[d]', but the purgative promise of his 'other life' fantasy rests on its deferral to some indefinite point in the future when he might make the change and move abroad to the colonies; in the meantime he is 'unclean for the present'.

The sense of his own inadequacy and powerlessness is mirrored in the sexual passivity he displays and in his masochistic tendency to eroticise his submissive relationship with Mrs Lovell, a relationship which Algernon declares has effectively 'done me up for every other woman living'.⁶⁸ Algernon's indecision is part of his passivity. He persists in his adoration of not only Mrs Lovell but also Rhoda; he finds each tantalisingly unobtainable, wanting both but obtaining neither. According to Deleuze, repetition in masochism, for which he takes Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1870) as the ur-text, is characterised by stasis, fixity, frozenness, and suspense.⁶⁹ These are qualities which inhibit the narrative in *Rhoda Fleming*, but which also impact clearly on Algernon's specific experience and identity. The deferred fantasy of Algernon's voluntary self-banishment abroad, and the inability to possess either object of his desire (Mrs Lovell or Rhoda), illustrates 'a pleasure based not in fulfilment but in suspense', which involves a corresponding anticipation of future pleasures sustained through an indefinite deferral of gratification – a deferral that is clearly masochistic.⁷⁰ As the novel itself promises but constantly withholds moments of resolution through repeated misunderstandings and lost opportunities, Algernon operates in an economy of suspense. His fantasies of the future are persistently deferred, and he finds a kind of perverse pleasure in the paralysis of indecision, the postponement of his emigration-dream, and in his sexual passivity

⁶⁷ Jean Sudrann, "'The Linked Eye and Mind": A Concept of Action in the Novels of George Meredith', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 4.4 (1964), 617-636 (p. 624).

⁶⁸ Meredith, *Rhoda Fleming. A Story*, vol. I, p. 262.

⁶⁹ Deleuze, cf p. 34

⁷⁰ Stewart, p. 2.

with manipulative Mrs Lovell. At the end of the novel, he remains in England, unmarried, yet instated as the Squire of Wrexby Hall. His dreams – of a woman to marry, and emigration abroad – are dismantled. In one sense, then, such fantasies are permanently deferred.

Meredith's *Rhoda Fleming* therefore disrupts the boundaries of conservative, heteronormative sexuality and dispenses with cultural assumptions about gender identity. In particular, the homoerotic tendencies of the novel exert a significant pull over the events of the narrative, many threads of which remain unresolved at the novel's close in a further rejection of heteronormative conventions. Rigid gender distinctions are subverted; women are seen to possess sexual agency while men cultivate and perform sexual passivity. The reciprocal binary of dominance and submission, typically aligned with gendered codes of behaviour, are instead considered fluid in Meredith's novel, particularly for the male masochist whose eroticised fantasies of deferral and frustration are echoed throughout by the abortive courtships, thwarted desires, and confused moments of miscommunication enacted by himself and those around him. Homoerotic dynamics, and other types of eroticised sexual marginality are deployed here to subvert dominant ideals about gender and about heterosexual imperatives. Even with the text's replication of heterosexual pairings (for example Mrs Lovell with, variously, Edward, Algernon, Percy and Robert; or Rhoda with Robert and Algernon), the very proliferation of those relationships, and the instability of the erotic triangles that they inscribe, transform *Rhoda Fleming* from a narrative primarily about heteronormative social and romantic structures to a narrative of queer dynamics.

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